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## **Creating Educational Synergies**

UK discourse depicts young people as out of control and in need of punitive policy responses amid concerns about knife and gun crime, poor mental health or unemployment. Yet, while policy seeks to alleviate persistent problems that young people face in contemporary society, it often responds by using language that stigmatises and dehumanises young people who are labelled as vulnerable, scrounger or troublesome in a situation where the, 'lack of decent employment (or any employment) accessible to these young people is airbrushed out of the picture'. (Mackie, 2019, P. 3). Yet, this article asserts the viable and purposeful role of professionally qualified youth workers as informal educators which is largely missing from policy and traditional educational research literature. In responding to Ledwith (2018), who argues that simply offering a critique, 'cannot dismantle the power of the neoliberal story without a captivating counternarrative' (p.23), we seek new narratives, that are, 'inspired by values that are at the heart of the future we would like to see'(p.23).

## **Discourse on Young People**

Young people are often depicted as being 'at risk' (Brunila, 2013), a problem (McInerney, 2009), as marginal, dangerous or anti-social (Clarke, 2009). The response to this discourse is often to adopt short-term projects (Brunila, 2013) focussed on 'fixing' or disciplining (White, 1996) 'problem youth' (Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015). This is not new, with generational outcries focusing on young people's behaviour, particularly violent behaviours, (Pearson, 1983; 2006) or lack of conformity to societal expectations.

Governmental policy often aligns with such discourse when discussing targeted interventions which can be seen as labelling and deficit focussed. Recently, when responding to a 22% increase in knife crime for England and Wales (ONS, 2017), the largest yearly increase ever recorded, the British

Government released its first Serious Violence Strategy (2018) which sought to provide reasons and answers for such crimes. It positively asserted the need to adopt a partnership approach to tackling violent knife crime, with a range of credible partners including education and youth services. However, proposals on how this will be taken forward suggest a continuation of stigmatising intervention strategies promoting diversionary activities, personal safety programmes and targeted harm reduction (HM Government, 2018) in contrast to addressing root causes of problems or funding holistic youth work services. A recent review of the troubled families programme (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2017, p.29) suggested,

Troubled families are typically larger in size, contain more dependent children and are more likely to be lone parent families than families nationally. They are also more likely to have had their first child at a younger age and live in social housing than those nationally.

Although, funding is offered to support these families, the discourse used – ‘troubled families’ is deficit, pathologising and labelling. It simplifies a complex range of issues into a catch all descriptor with local councils being tracked as to their success in addressing six key measures including - Worklessness and financial exclusion; Education and school attendance; Children who need help; Crime and anti-social behaviour; Domestic abuse and health. Practitioners should be aware of such simplification of complex issues and seek to address underlying social problems as opposed to subscribing to a deficit discourse which depicts families and young people as out of control and in need of punitive policy responses.

While finding an alternative discourse that facilitates empowerment is advocated for (Education Scotland, 2019; Fitzsimons, Hope, Russell and Cooper, 2012) youth services across the UK have faced unprecedented financial cuts (NYA, 2014; Unison, 2016) resulting in the youth service being decimated with some Local Authorities being left with few statutory youth services at all. Nicholls

(2018) suggests that this deliberate demolition of statutory youth service in England is aligned with Giroux's (2010) analysis of the culture of neoliberalism, which is deliberately destructive in seeking to eradicate young people from social and democratic processes and structures. This raises further concerns in context where,

...the desire for endless consumption growth without due concern for the effects on the environment and inequality ...[and] ... the desire to cut costs and boost short-term profits, driven by the demands of the financial markets, means that real wages have also been declining ... [so] ...the extreme free market model is also behind the rise in inequality.

Maxton and Randers (2016, p. 73)

A systematic and sectoral dismantling of youth work services, and having to bid for limited 'pots of funding' offers a tokenistic contribution to assisting young people into work or to achieve their 'full potential'. This is troubling not only in reducing funding for community based youth work but in being directly aligned with established orthodoxies that do little to challenge a pervasive neoliberal discourse that seeks compliance within a market driven economy (Nicholls, 2018; Coburn and Gormally, 2017). Practices and policies, which persist in pathologising young people as broken or needing fixed, create a distinction between those who are deemed as deserving or underserving (Cooper et al, 2015). The discourse is flawed and requires to be challenged. Alternative narratives that are more closely aligned to salutogenic purposes for equality, justice and wellbeing may assist in reclaiming youth work within a reducing public sector and importantly, in strengthening its position as education that is additional and alternative to schooling.

### **Why is this debate important now?**

What is needed is an education system that works for all young people. Previous studies (Harland and McCready, 2012; Harland and Morgan, 2011) have explored the role of youth work

Individuals have different abilities and aspirations and thus, the measuring of success should not be limited to a view of education as formal schooling but should also recognise the contribution of informal education. Ledwith (2016, p. 49) argues that, 'education is a political process it can never be neutral...to take a neutral stand is to ignore the profoundly political nature of education, and ignoring it, we let it do its damage'. Yet, formal education is only one way of helping young people to learn how to flourish.

In school contexts, border pedagogy could also assist school teachers to consider reconceptualising their professional roles in collaboration with wider educational practitioners. The role of youth work education in transcending professional boundaries across different educational settings facilitates learning for life both inside and outside of schools. Youth work can enhance the school curriculum in assisting young people to become critically conscious citizens whose voices are heard and acted upon in creating their futures.

Machin and Vignoles (2006) have noted that since the 1980's there have been calls to reform the education system in response to problems of comparatively low levels of achievement, concern for proficiency in literacy and numeracy, and in widening access to Higher Education. Despite their call for research informed policy development, these problems persist. A shift from New Labour's policies such as Every Child Matters (2003) under the Coalition government, and furthered under recent governments, brings a clear focus on academic attainment. However, Walport and Leunig (2017) note that, ten years on, 'literacy and numeracy levels in the UK compare poorly internationally and there is considerable variation in proficiency across nations and regions within the UK' (p. 30). The tendency to look for quick fix, short-term interventions, prioritises the acquisition of skills that assist in the competition for advantage in the workplace. Such a limited response to disparities in social, cultural and economic contexts has simply sustained conditions in which, 'those who are best resourced economically are best placed to succeed educationally... [and

to]... confer educational advantage on their children in an economically stratified society' (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2009, p. 145).

Recognising that learning in the workplace can help to address concerns among young people during their transition from school to work, Field and Tucket (2016) also emphasise growing interest in 'informal learning in communities and homes, and in the ways that skills developed in these settings can be transferred across contexts' (p. 4). This affirms the inherent potential in educational youth and community learning, which can transcend professional boundaries and work with young people and families in a dialogical relationship to facilitate a more emancipatory pedagogy for social justice (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). Yet, Field and Tucket (2016) also caution against highly targeted interventionist practice and emphasise a need to consider, 'how best to address the issue, the benefits of targeting have to be balanced against the risks of stigmatisation' (p. 9).

Educational youth work involves qualified and critically conscious youth workers developing a professional relationship that is grounded in a social and democratic educational purpose of change and transformation (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). This kind of youth work is offered openly to young people who can choose whether and how to engage in learning, or not. It takes place in a range of different contexts and settings. What sets youth work apart from other professional practices is located in its methodological approach and underpinning values through which practitioners seek to uphold an emancipatory purpose. Considering new possibilities that are reflected in aspects of contemporary practice, our core argument is that the contribution of educational youth work should be fully recognised as integral to assuring a fairer education system that is accessible to all young people. As such, we assert that the work of professional youth and community workers, in responding to pervasive austerity measures, a reducing public sector (Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015) and the increasing stigmatisation of young people, should be more routinely reflected in education policy and practice in the development of a fairer education system.

## **Inequitable Social Arrangements in Education**

Baker et al. (2009) raise questions of inequality in the formal education system, in terms of the hierarchical view of teacher - student relationships, while drawing on Freire (1996) and Illich (1995), to acknowledge informal education as a creative and liberating process. Taking a focus on the formal system, they argue that, far from being developed on egalitarian grounds, 'public education was introduced primarily for the purposes of social control...to develop a compliant and obedient workforce' (p.140). In turn, Baker et al., suggest that the role of formal education in regulating access to goods and in defining cultural and social values has systematically worked against egalitarian interests and has neglected 'the centrality of emotional work to teaching and learning...[with]...few serious attempts to educate people about their emotions and affective relations' (p. 165). Alternatively, educational youth work, is routinely concerned with well-being and educational progression and is focussed on the development of positive peer relationships, where subjective well-being and self-efficacy prevail (Davies, 2005, 2015; Smith, 2002; Young, 2006) with a purpose that is identified as emancipatory (Batsleer, 2008; Coburn and Gormally, 2017). This suggests a potential role for educational youth work within an integrated education system.

For example, the Scottish Attainment Challenge was launched in 2015 as an attempt to reduce pupil attainment differentials by targeting the nine most deprived areas in Scotland. This introduced the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) to provide funding directly to head teachers who could then work in partnership with their local authority to address the attainment gap specifically in literacy, numeracy and health and well-being:

The Pupil Equity Fund is allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty related attainment gap. In 2017 to 2018, £120 million will be distributed

Scottish Government (2015)

The Pupil Equity Fund: national operational guidance 2018 (p.3) states,

Parents and the local community are a valuable source of support and partnership. In many contexts schools may be able to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people by working with a range of bodies such as parent groups; parent councils; other local authority and public sector services; third sector organisations (including youth work, family learning organisations); other educational sectors; and/or centres of expertise.

Understanding the needs of children and young people should help to identify appropriate areas for collaboration.

This recognition has led to the release of funds for youth workers to be employed in providing learning continuity in core areas of literacy and health and well-being, through school holiday provision. Historically, such provision was routinely integrated within youth services but has more recently been curtailed due to lack of funding. Thus, while this PEF funding offers investment in the futures of children and young people, again the lack of core funding suggests that more work is needed to strengthen synthesis between school and community or youth work learning, all year round, especially in creating parity of professional esteem.

This kind of short term targeted funding, also raises a question on why professionally qualified youth workers can be viewed as appropriate educators during school holidays but seem, at other times of the year, to be a poor relation whose purpose is to 'deal with', rather than 'educate', children who are labelled as problematic or misbehaving. Our argument is that qualified youth workers *are* professional educators, equal but different to colleagues in other areas of education. Thus, while welcoming this additional youth work funding, its reliance on a bidding process determined by



individual School Head Teachers undermines the position of educational youth work that should be routinely funded appropriately.

A further example of inequality across the education professions is the Pupil Premium Fund (PPF). Introduced in England, by the Coalition UK Government in 2010, which also provided additional funding to schools (per student) to spend on raising outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Foundation for Education Research (Williams and Grayson, 2018) recently found that, despite early indicators of success in raising attainment, the PPF may now be lacking direction as,

Concerns are beginning to grow that further cuts to funding may impact on the future success of the pupil premium... [and that]... schools are increasingly using the funding to cover day-to-day costs for all pupils, diluting its impact

Williams and Grayson (2018, p. 6).

Each of these strategic policy drivers actively seek to increase the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, this could place further emphasis on the importance of formally assessed educational outcomes as opposed to systematically addressing issues of poverty that have been exacerbated by austerity measures. In seeing schools as 'engines of social mobility' (Gove, 2010) we must be cautious of viewing quantitative, educational statistics on formal examination rates as the sole panacea for addressing issues of 'disadvantage'. As de St Croix (2018) has noted, there is an increasing marketization of the educational sector where 'Schools, universities and youth centres are 'economised' – their effectiveness is increasingly framed in terms of their measureable contribution to the labour market' (p. 415).

In a study of the PPF, in one school, Craske (2018, p. 553) found that these policies can become new ways to subscribe to a broader neo-liberal agenda which places responsibility for social justice issues on individual schools and teachers. The 'cultural conservatism' that has affected curriculum and pedagogy and the co-opting of language such as social justice (Yandell, 2017) is something to be conscious of under Governments that persist in driving neo-liberalism. PPF encapsulates this persistence, in mobilising the language of social justice and combining it with tools of the neoliberal order to make it difficult, although not impossible, for individual schools and teachers to engage in clear-cut resistance. Alternatively, having an emancipatory purpose, youth work educators can collaborate with teachers in taking a critical conciliatory stance in helping young people labelled as disadvantaged or vulnerable to thrive. Moving beyond the technicist "what works" agenda currently being promoted for teacher professional development, youth workers in this context can facilitate border crossing and the continuation of emancipatory practices.

Creating a reliance on short term or targeted funding, places youth work solely as a useful intervention to 'fix' problem young people and fails to recognise its wider educational potential. Therefore, it is unsurprising that youth work practitioners seek to refine, reclaim and redefine educational youth work as a discrete professional area within education that can be differentiated from more general or specific services for young people. While a range of services are frequently identified as youth work, most have little in common with educational youth work, beyond the age of those involved. For example, a young person may attend a sport and fitness club which brings health benefits and also helps build social relationships and facilitates co-operation with others. While the social side may be important, the focus on sport and fitness activity is the primary purpose of practice. Those involved in running such a club may describe themselves as a sports coach. Yet, without coaching certificates or appropriate qualifications from the governing body of the sport, this description might be called into question.

However, it appears that anyone involved in working with young people can call themselves youth workers and this, to us, is problematic. This kind of generic claim fails to recognise educational youth work as a distinctive professional practice which is equal to other professions that are purposefully engaged in facilitating the educational development and well-being of young people. Yet, facilitating educational development and well-being among young people, does not happen through pronouncement or instruction. Instead, a range of educational methodologies combine to create conditions for critical consciousness raising, and scaffold informal education through problem-posing methods.

### **Where Next?**

Our thoughts on this have been in development for some time (Coburn, 2010; Coburn and Gormally, 2015) and as such it is heartening to see progressive policy developments emerging. Education Scotland have recently (2019) developed a more holistic approach to education with the introduction of 'An Empowered System' Approach. Whilst this approach is still in development, eight key partners have been identified with the aim of improving children and young people's outcomes. They are - school leaders, learners, local authority and regional improvement collaborative, Scottish Government and national organisations, partners, support staff, teachers and practitioners and parents and carers. If this ambitious system is to be realised then we argue educational youth work should not be viewed as an 'add-on' to formal education or to health, crime prevention or employability. Rather, it should be viewed as an integral, yet distinctive, educational practice, where qualified youth workers have a crucial role to play in ensuring that young people are active participants in individual and collective decision making as part of wider society. Seeing educational youth work as a discrete professional practice offers the possibility for complimentary collaboration across professional practice borders. We conclude that border pedagogy provides a means to explore the boundaries of all educational practices. This will help in interrogating educational

synergies that can be applied in practice to create fairness for all young people in developing their capabilities to live well.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary policy drivers for inter-professional practice have created a pivotal moment for engaging inter-professionally. This could facilitate a critique of educational boundaries and create a nuanced approach to education in which youth workers engage with young people in communities and schools, in order for them to learn holistically. Seeing young people positively as opposed to seeing them as deficient rejects the need of a formulaic fix in response to an austerity driven precarious existence. Positioning youth work as a distinct professional practice is of interest to youth work educators but also offers possibilities that may be of interest to school teachers and early years educators in developing new synergies for professional practice as a more holistic education system.

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